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ABSTRACT

Briefly described is a theory of reckless behavior in adolescence that includes cognitive and biological factors. Discussion focuses on several factors: the adolescent's egocentric personal fable--the adolescent conviction that his/her thoughts and feelings are unique, the personality trait of sensation seeking, the fact that by their late 20s or early 30s the biological engine that drives individuals' sensation seeking slows down, the experience of the consequences of egocentrism, the work experience, and marriage. Findings from research on drunk driving among male high school students and sex without contraception among female high school students supplement the discussion. It is acknowledged that offered suggestions concerning the decline of reckless behavior are speculative. A call is made for longitudinal and cross-sectional studies on the decline of reckless behavior from adolescence to early adulthood. (RH)

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Understanding Reckless Behavior in Adolescence

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Paper presented at the biennial meeting of the Society for Research
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Understanding reckless behavior in adolescence

Many of us could recite a story or two, at least, about some reckless episode we engaged in as adolescents that we look back upon now with some disbelief, that we would never think of doing now, as adults. Why is that adolescents engage in reckless behavior at a higher rate than people of other ages? If you look at the statistics for behavior such as drunk driving, premarital sex without contraception, illegal drug use, and crime, you find that adolescents as a group are far overrepresented. The answer to the question of why that is so is not only of intrinsic interest, but also of social policy interest, since these kinds of behavior constitute significant social problems.

Some specific areas of reckless behavior, such as sex without contraception and crime, have received research attention, but thus far no comprehensive theory has been offered. Today I want to describe to you a theory of reckless behavior in adolescence that includes both cognitive and biological factors. This is a complex topic, and each of the subtopics-- drunk driving, crime, etc.-- has its own complexities, but I want to argue especially for the role of adolescent egocentrism and sensation seeking.

Elkind (1967, 1985), in his description of adolescent egocentrism, says that one aspect of it is the personal fable, which refers to the adolescent conviction that his/her thoughts and feelings are unique, unparalleled, unprecedented. This includes a sense of being immune from catastrophe-- the belief that "It won't happen to me"-- even when they are behaving recklessly. They see themselves as heroes in a great drama, and catastrophe is not part of the script.

How could you operationalize this, how could you test this

hypothesis? The way I've tried to do it is to think of it in terms of probability judgments. When adolescents are operating on the basis of the personal fable, they see themselves as special, as unique. It seems reasonable to expect, then, that they would distort the perceived risk of a given behavior in their favor. That is, if they are engaging in reckless behavior, they may tend to perceive the possibility that disaster would result as lower, compared to adolescents who are not.

Let me show you some results from two recent studies of mine that seem to support this (Table 1). The first one concerns drunk driving, with a sample of high-school-age males. You can see, here, that adolescents who have driven while drunk perceive the probability that "a person" who drives while drunk will have an accident as lower, compared to adolescents who have not driven while drunk. They distort the probabilities in their favor. The second one concerns sex without contraception, among high school females. Here, the same pattern is evident. Adolescents who are engaging in the behavior (in this case sex without contraception) see the probability that disaster will result (in this case an unintended pregnancy) as lower, compared to adolescents who are not doing it. I should note that a number of other studies have found this same pattern, of a tendency to underestimate the likelihood of pregnancy on the part of girls who are having sex without contraception, although to my knowledge this is the first to find this result with a normal high school sample. Others have obtained their samples from girls who have come to family planning clinics.

The other factor I want to discuss, which I also think plays a large role in reckless behavior, is a personality trait known as sensation seeking, conceptualized by Marvin Zuckerman (1979; Zuckerman

et al., 1978). Sensation seeking is described by Zuckerman as a trait involving the propensity to seek out a wide variety of complex and intense sensations and experiences. There are individual differences on this characteristic, as there are on any dimension of personality; some people are relatively high in sensation seeking, some people are relatively low. There are also group differences, and the most important one for our purposes is that adolescents tend to score highest on Zuckerman's measure of sensation seeking (Zuckerman et al., 1978), compared to other age groups. This is a forced-choice measure, where you're given two alternatives and asked to choose one. "I like wild, uninhibited parties," vs. "I prefer quiet parties with good conversation." "I would like to try parachute jumping," vs. "I would never want to try jumping out of a plane with or without a parachute." Adolescents score highest on this, and there is a steady decline with age.

The implication of this is that one of the reasons that adolescents engage in a disproportionate amount of reckless behavior is that they are high in sensation seeking. This quality makes them willing, even eager, to engage in reckless behavior for the sake of producing intense and varied sensation. The very risk involved may increase the intensity, and therefore the desirability, of the experience.

Again, I have some data that support this hypothesis (Table 2). Here you see the findings on drunk driving. Adolescent males who have driven while drunk score higher on Zuckerman's measure of sensation seeking than other males their age. For sex without contraception among female adolescents, there is a similar pattern: those who have had sex without contraception are higher on the general characteristic of

sensation seeking.

Now, all of the kinds of behavior mentioned above-- drunk driving, sex without contraception, drug use, crime-- have declined markedly by the time people reach their late 20's or early 30's. Why would that be so? I think there are a number of contributing factors, some of them related to egocentrism and sensation seeking. For one thing, the biological engine driving sensation seeking slows down. As I said, scores on measures of sensation seeking decline with age, and by the time you reach young adulthood the propensity for sensation seeking has cooled considerably from what it was when you were an adolescent. So, you don't play your car stereo as loud as you used to; you think in units of single beers rather than six-packs; you try to get home at a reasonable hour on Saturday night instead of staying out half the night on some reckless adventure. You simply aren't as attracted to the kind of intense sensation that often goes along with reckless behavior. A level of intensity you found thrilling as an adolescent you may not find nearly as pleasant ten years later; maybe you'll even find it unpleasant by then.

A second factor, this one related to egocentrism, is that if you engage in reckless behavior for a long enough period of time, you do suffer the consequences. So, by the time you reach young adulthood, perhaps by now you got a ticket for drunk driving, or you were involved in an unintended pregnancy, and so on. If so, the experience may knock you out of the orbit of your egocentrism, and force you to realize that you are not immune from the consequences of acting recklessly. In my current research I'm looking at how the experience of negative consequences from reckless behavior influences later behavior; it seems

reasonable to expect that it would make you more cautious in the future.

A third factor, also related to egocentrism, is work experience. This might also force you to be less egocentric. You have to learn how to take other people's points of view, and adjust yours to accomodate theirs, or you'll get fired. Also, in the workplace there are clear punishments involved for behaving recklessly, in a way there often is not in other aspects of an adolescent's life. In my current research I'm also examining the role of work experience in relation to reckless behavior.

Finally, marriage is certainly a factor for many people. The average age for marriage is 24-25, and once that occurs the number of opportunities for acting recklessly inevitably declines. Perhaps as a single adolescent, on Friday night you'd go to happy hour somewhere, then out dancing, and who knows what else-- very possibly, some variant of reckless behavior. Now, you pick up some take-out Chinese on the way home from work Friday evening, have dinner with your spouse, and maybe rent a video. Marriage, then, fosters a kind of stability and routine that is antithetical to reckless behavior. Marriage also contributes to growth out of egocentrism. You have to adjust yourself constantly to someone else's point of view, and you may also realize that you are responsible to someone in a way you were not before. If you behave recklessly, it may have profound consequences not only for you but also for someone very important to you, and that may be something you consider before engaging in reckless behavior.

But these suggestions concerning the decline of reckless behavior are speculative, at this point. There is a need for longitudinal and cross-sectional studies focusing on the decline of reckless behavior from adolescence to early adulthood.

Table 1. Egocentrism and reckless behavior

	Have you ever driven while drunk?				
	Yes (N=89)		No (N=92)		
	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD	
Likelihood of accident from drunk driving	2.83	.92	3.42	.82	$F(1,179) = 21.06, p<.001$
Occasions of drunk driving before accident likely	2.33	1.40	1.35	.54	$F(1,174) = 39.15, p<.001$

	Have you ever had sex without contraception?				
	Yes (N=52)		No (N=93)		
	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD	
Likelihood of pregnancy from sex w/o contraception	3.37	.71	3.63	.57	$F(1,142) = 6.21, p<.01$
Occasions of sex w/o contraception before pregnant	1.55	.99	1.17	.57	$F(1,141) = 8.36, p<.01$

Note. The first question for drunk driving read in full, "Imagine a person your age who went out and got drunk and then drove home, nearly every Saturday night for a year. How likely do you think it would be that he would get into a car accident some time in the course of that year? Possible responses ranged from 1 (not at all likely) to 4 (extremely likely). The second question for drunk driving read in full, "How many times do you think a person would have to drive while drunk before he would get into an accident?" Possible responses ranged from 1 (less than five times) to 5 (at least 150 times). The first question for sex without contraception read in full, "Imagine a girl your age who had sex about once a week, without any concern for using some kind of birth control. Over a year's time, how likely do you think she would be to become pregnant?" Possible responses ranged from 1 (not at all likely) to 4 (extremely likely). The second question for sex without contraception read in full, "How many times do you think a girl would have to have sex without any concern for birth control before she would become pregnant?" Possible responses ranged from 1 (less than five times) to 5 (around 100 times or more).

Table 2. Sensation seeking and reckless behavior

	Have you ever driven while drunk?				
	Yes (N=89)		No (N=92)		
	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD	
Thrill and Adventure	8.3	1.8	7.4	2.3	$F(1,179) = 7.22, p<.01$
Disinhibition	5.6	1.9	3.6	2.2	$F(1,179) = 40.59, p<.001$
Experience Seeking	4.5	1.8	4.1	1.9	$F(1,179) = 2.06, NS$
Boredom Susceptibility	4.5	2.1	3.6	2.1	$F(1,179) = 7.06, p<.01$
Total Scale	22.7	4.7	18.7	5.8	$F(1,179) = 18.74, p<.001$

	Have you ever had sex without contraception?				
	Yes (N=52)		No (N=93)		
	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD	
Thrill and Adventure	6.8	2.5	6.7	2.8	$F(1,143) = .04, NS$
Disinhibition	4.3	1.9	2.8	2.2	$F(1,143) = 15.22, p<.001$
Experience Seeking	4.9	2.1	4.3	2.0	$F(1,143) = 3.29, NS$
Boredom Susceptibility	3.5	1.9	2.6	1.9	$F(1,143) = 7.44, p<.01$
Total Scale	19.4	5.6	16.4	5.5	$F(1,143) = 9.98, p<.01$

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